



Imagine a child shaded under a tree's canopy – looking upward in wonder at the branches and leaves fanning out in all directions. Below the child's feet, the tree's roots reach outward and dig deep. The child begins climbing; pulling upward on every branch, feeling each leaf; looking, learning, and laughing.

This simple graphic illustrates the goal of our Children's Forest proposal—a strong foundation of environmental literacy—rooted in foundational principles and branching out to the special places, programs, and partners of southern New Mexico. Together, roots and branches sustain the child's thirst for knowledge, experience, and inspiration. We, in turn, must sustain the tree.

## **SOUTHERN NEW MEXICO CHILDREN'S FOREST**

The Southern New Mexico Children's Forest (SNMCF) encompasses not just the Lincoln National Forest, but many land management agencies, educational and youth organizations, and interested individuals that are bringing kids to the outdoors and the outdoors to kids. It is not one place, nor one program, but a network of places, programs, and activities that give all citizens of and visitors to southern New Mexico, the opportunity to visit, explore, and learn about the outdoor world.

Through our coalition of partners, we will offer exciting educational content, shared gathering places, a strong network of educators, resource professionals, and supporters, a cache of learning resources, and a centralized logistics organization for transportation, scheduling, and material delivery.

The Lincoln National Forest (LNF) has a Children's Forest (CF) Plan in progress which should be finalized by the time this grant is awarded. The Plan will include strategies for administrative organization of the CF, an array of possible activities and programs that could be part of the CF, and specific actions to get started.

## **WHY CREATE A CHILDREN'S FOREST?**

Our kids "know" much more about the world, but have often experienced much less. The growing coalition of partners demonstrates that our communities are thirsty for action to reverse these trends, and the Forest Service is poised to support that action. For the last 40 years, the LNF has helped provide our communities with invaluable connections to the natural world. However, with cultural shifts in our children's digitally focused and increasingly sedentary lifestyles, we know we must do more. We're optimistic about the future and want to be part of improving the next generation's chance to be happy, healthy, and well-educated about their world. In this International Year of the Forest, we want to bring the forest back into their lives. We want to open their minds to the outdoors. With our coalition partners at the table and ready to contribute, this is the ideal time to create a CF!

## **COMMITMENT**

The LNF's leadership unreservedly supports the spirit, planning, and implementation of a Children's Forest initiative. In late 2009, before Agency funding was revealed, the Lincoln and partners contracted for the planning of a Children's Forest (\$23,000 grant) and convened a community charrette to help kick-start the effort. The CF Plan will be delivered in January, 2011. Forest leadership met

with our Regional Forester, CE Coordinator, and Directors of Public Affairs and Recreation to confirm long-term support and further CF efforts on the LNF. Long-term commitment is also evidenced by the Forest's representation on Board of the Environmental Education Association of NM and participation on the state-wide Leave No NM Child Inside.

## **FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF MORE KIDS IN THE WOODS**

### **Connecting Kids, Families, & Adults to Healthy Outdoor Activities Across all Landscapes**

With our partners, the LNF Children's Forest reaches from the high desert, through piñon and juniper woodlands, to ponderosa pine and mixed conifer forests. The Children's Forest spans thousands of years from the pre-historic fossils of Trackways National Monument, the geologic lift that created the mountains of the LNF, BLM's Valley of Fire lava flow, and the native people who used southern New Mexico, to the (relatively) recent railroad logging of the early 1900's, technology used today at the National Solar Observatory, and the state of the art positioning, navigating, and mapping systems used for natural resource management.

We offer opportunities for "kids of all ages" to participate in Children's Forest activities. Any age can participate in family events such as community celebrations, weekend nature hikes, and explorations through the website. Pre-schoolers may also participate through daycare and school age kids on field trips, classroom visits, after-school programs, Scouts, etc. College students will have an opportunity to take on a Children's Forest internship; and adults can participate with their child's school and at public events, such as a community education hike, etc.

### **Supporting Economically Viable Communities / Creating New Education and Career Pathways**

New Mexico consistently ranks near the bottom of educational rankings; according to the National Center for Education Statistics, NM 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders score approximately 10 points (5%) lower than the national average in reading writing, math and science. We have the second highest percentage of students that attend Title 1 schools, after Mississippi.

Our grade-appropriate field trip curricula for pre-school, all K-8 classes, and selected high school classes are the keystone of our Children's Forest. This will eventually give every child in southern New Mexico at least two field trips per year to an outdoor space. The grade-appropriate curricula will introduce, teach, and/or reinforce the State standards and benchmarks that teachers are required to cover. We expect this to increase student understanding as measured by test scores and surveys.

Students, parents, educators, and the general public will be exposed to more natural resource professionals and scientists through Children's Forest activities than ever before. They will see regular people, just like them, who have interesting and rewarding careers that they may now consider for themselves and their off-spring.

The Children's Forest Intern Program will be an exciting opportunity for college students working toward teaching and natural resource degrees. Through the Education department at New Mexico State University-Alamogordo, two hard-working students will earn the honor of being Children's Forest Interns each semester and during the summer. Interns will help us design and implement Children's Forest programs, while learning about conservation education and becoming better teachers themselves.

## Professional Development Opportunities for Educators

One program of our Children's Forest is an After School Teacher's Institute. One day per week, teachers meet after school for 1½ hours to learn hands-on environmental education activities. Teachers will be able to implement award-winning curricula such as Project Learning Tree, Project WET, Project WILD, Project Food, Land, and People, and Project Archaeology after attending Institute Workshops. The SNMCF website will have links to partners, resources, and opportunities for educators. On field trips or in-school programs, teachers often learn as much, or more, than students.

## NEW PROGRAMS to be implemented as resources become available:

These proposed programs have been identified through the community charrette and the Children's Forest planning process as a holistic and complementary approach to connecting our kids through a variety of venues and programs.

- Two NMSU-Alamogordo **Internships** will be offered each semester, including summer, for the 2011-12 school year. Interns will be students currently studying education and/or biology or related fields who will be selected through an application process. Interns will be registered for a 3-credit Individual Studies: Children's Forest class, administered by Dr. Joyce Hill, Division Head for Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education. Interns will spend 20 hours/week planning and implementing specific CF projects and will be coordinated by Peg Crim, LNF employee. In addition to gaining valuable experience, interns will be more likely to integrate conservation education into their classrooms in the future, because of this experience.
- A kid-friendly **CF Guidebook** will be developed which will include an engaging map of partner places and programs in southern NM, games & puzzles, and information on local geology, archaeology, flora, fauna, etc. It is a resource for children to plan, reference, and take with them on their outings.
- **Grade-Appropriate Field Trip Curricula** will be developed for all grades K-8, for pre-school and for certain classes in high school. Transportation funding will be procured through grants, fund-raisers, or solicitations.
- **Archaeology Days** for schools will teach our kids about those who came before us and what we can learn from them.
- Getting **Underserved Kids** outside and into nature through partnership and activities with Big Brothers/Big Sisters (BBBS), field trips for Boys & Girls Clubs (BGC) and Recreation Centers during the summer and on teacher in-service days.
- With our health-related partners, we will create a **Prescription Program for Outdoor Activities**,
- Tailor existing "**Junior Ranger**" program to a LNF-specific program whereby kids can earn a patch or reward for doing certain outdoor activities, and/or a SNMCF stamp or passport program.
- **CF Geocaching or Earthcaching** program.
- Building an **Arts & Environment** program using theater, music,
- To connect with our youth where they are (in a digital world) we will create a **CF Website** with links to all our partners, calendar of events, interactive maps of facilities, virtual tour of CF locations, a database for teachers, a family trip planner, Scout information, puzzles, games, how-to activities, an "Ask A Ranger" column, and career pages, earth-caching resources, and junior ranger blogs. Activities are designed to entice our youth back into the natural world that they are missing.



## **PARTNERSHIPS**

Various agencies and individuals in Southeastern New Mexico have been offering a variety of outdoor opportunities for the last twenty years. Most of these activities were spearheaded by highly motivated individuals who took it upon themselves to make things happen. Sometimes they were an employee of an agency and were paid for their time. Often they did it because they believed in it, paid or not.

The Lincoln National Forest has recently pulled together many of these individuals to form a coalition supporting conservation education endeavors, marketing conservation education opportunities, and garnering financial support for these activities. This broad coalition of partners offers quality outdoor experiences to citizens of and visitors to southeastern New Mexico. These experiences improve quality of life through physical exercise, education about natural resources and the environment, the impact of humans on the environment, and choices we can make to alter those impacts. The relationships built through the coalition are already benefitting conservation education in the area. Plans are in the works for school programs in Las Cruces, teacher training for Project Archaeology, and bringing more “earth” into Alamogordo’s large Earth Day celebration. The coalition is currently in the process of applying for several grants—a Healthy Kids grant to integrate our environment and the arts through a high school theater production for school kids and for Alamogordo’s large Earth Day celebration.

Organizations represented in the coalition include, but are not limited to: White Sands National Monument, BLM, Asombra Institute for Science Education, Girl Scouts of the Greater Southwest, Boy Scouts-Yucca Council and Conquistador Council, New Mexico Rails-to-Trails Association, National Solar Observatory, NMSU-Alamogordo, Oliver Lee State Park, NM Game & Fish, Otero County, Alamogordo Public School System, Otero Soil & Water Conservation District, Mescalero Apache Tribe, Otero County Community Health Council, and Scientifically Connected Communities. As we implement more of the proposed CF activities and programs, more partners will be direct participants, presenting activities on the grade appropriate field trips, maintaining their links on the website, and sponsoring activities for after-school programs (e.g. BBBS, B&GC, Scouts, etc.).

## **SUSTAINABILITY**

Since 2009, a Children’s Forest vision has blossomed, growing beyond Forest Service boundaries and traditional participants. Currently, the coalition involves over two dozen partners, representing public lands, education, healthcare, local government, child advocacy groups, and business. Having a CF plan, supportive partners, and successful programs in place will position the CF to compete for funding from various public and private grants (two grants are currently being pursued). When coalition partners see the fruit of their contributions, they will become champions for additional fiscal support through direct agency and local governmental funding and external grant opportunities.

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